

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 May 2007

## Europe

### Polish doctors begin indefinite strike

On May 21, doctors in Poland began an indefinite strike to demand pay increases and more funding for the public health system. According to the BBC, doctors at about a third of Poland's 600 public hospitals are taking part in the strike and providing emergency services only. Doctors are seeking a 100 percent pay increase.

The government of Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski has rejected the pay demand, stating that the measure would cost US\$3.9 billion and would "break public finances." Kaczynski told a news conference, "Meeting these demands would mean an absolute erosion of the public finance plans."

In Poland general practitioners earn as little as US\$400 a month and more than 5 percent of them have left the country to work abroad since Poland joined the European Union three years ago. Many GPs are forced to work night shifts or to take on private clients in order to earn enough money to live on. This is despite doctors winning a 30 percent pay increase last year.

The All-Poland Doctors' Union organised the strike and warned that it would call on doctors at another 100 hospitals to come out if an agreement was not reached soon. The union has not called the strike on the basis of support for a publicly funded health service, but for measures to privatise the health service and the introduction of fees for some services.

### Air traffic controllers and flight attendants strike in Italy

On May 22, air traffic controllers took strike action in Italy over their contract negotiations. The controllers are employed by the air authority (ENAV). They began strike action at 0800 GMT and continued until 1600 GMT.

The state airline Alitalia reportedly cancelled up to 400 flights and the action resulted in airlines across Europe cancelling dozens of flights to and from Italy. A total of 1,500 flights were hit by the dispute. Among the airlines affected were British Airways, Lufthansa and Iberia.

Flight attendants at Alitalia also struck to demand that management adhere to agreements regulating the number of crew members and the hours of rest between flights. The action resulted in the cancellation of 30 flights. The previous day 30 flights were cancelled at Alitalia as some employees struck over a rule-book protest.

The Assaereo association of airlines said the industrial action had cost an estimated €50 million.

### Postal workers continue strike in Ghent, Belgium

Striking drivers and postal workers at the main sorting office in Ghent, Belgium entered the 11th day of their strike on May 21. The strike is affecting the delivery of mail in the central area of the city.

The strike action continued following the strikers' rejection of a proposed settlement by management at De Post. The members of the ACV trade union have called for a further round of negotiations with management in a dispute over recruitment policy, the transfers of some workers, and the reorganisation within the company. Workers are also objecting to problems with Georoute, a computer programme used to draw up the postal routes, and other issues associated with the computerisation of postal sorting.

## Middle East

### Iraqi rubber workers take indefinite strike action

Hundreds of workers at a Rubber plant in Diwaniyah went on strike May 15 to demand the cancellation of the salary system approved recently by the Ministry of Industry. The director of media relations at the plant, Khalil Ibrahim, said that "the strike is on a permanent basis, all sections of the plant will stop working until the current pay system adopted by the American civil administrator, Mr Paul Bremer, is abolished"

### Rail workers stage nationwide industrial action in Iraq

Thousands of railway workers in Basra, Kirkuk and Samawah took strike action—backed by the vast majority of rail workers—on May 15. The strike has paralysed Iraq's main North/South rail corridor.

The workers are demanding that the new salary scheme adopted by the Iraqi government should include railway workers as well. Other workers' demands include improved safety, protection from attack and fundamental workers' rights. They also want the immediate payment of delayed bonuses.

The secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federations' (ITF) Inland Transport Section, Mac Urata, said, "It beggars belief that the dictatorial anti-union laws of the Saddam Hussein era are still in place. Legislation denying rail and other public services workers the right to strike and belong to a union must be removed immediately. The ITF fully supports this legitimate action"

### **Egyptian workers hunger strike**

Around 500 workers on strike at the Suez Al-Zoyout Al-Motakamla company, which produces cooking oil, announced the start of a hunger strike from May 22.

The workers staged a sit-in last Wednesday and since May 19 have brought production at the factory to a complete halt. They are demanding their bonuses and profit shares that have remained unpaid since 2004.

Company owner Ahmad Alam Eddin sent a fax from Cairo on Monday threatening to send in Interior Ministry troops to break the strike. It was in response that the workers announced their hunger strike.

### **Egyptian garments workers' sit-in nears fourth week**

More than 150 workers, out of a total labour force of 284, are still occupying their factory in Talkha in the Nile Delta province of Daqahliya at the Mansoura-España. The sit-in recently entered its 26th day.

Many of the workers are sleeping on floors, with few supplies of food, water, and suffering from deterioration in their health. Three quarters of the labour force are women. They have been away from their families since April 21.

On May 15, a group of around 25 women climbed to the roof of the factory, and threatened to commit suicide if the government did not intervene to resolve the dispute.

Al-Masrif Al-Muttahid, the owning bank, which has been paying the workers only LE120 to 250 a month (US\$21.00 to \$44.00), has stopped paying their bonuses and May Day grants since 1999. Workers, who live in Mansoura and neighbouring villages, pay from LE1 to LE3 (\$US0.08 to \$0.53) a day for transportation. This equates to LE30 to LE90 (US\$5.00 to \$US16.00) a month. They are frequently forced to work on the holy day of Friday.

The workers have vented their anger at the General Federation trade union officials and some members of the union factory committee who are "concerned with nothing but disbanding the sit-in and sending us home with promises only."

## **Africa**

### **Doctors strike in Ethiopia**

Resident surgeons and orthopaedic doctors called a strike on May 11 at the Black Lion Hospital in Addis Ababa University, which continued until May 21. The strike was called off after the university agreed to their demands.

The strikers complained about receiving a much smaller sum for night shifts than other doctors at the hospital. Those on strike were paid only 16 Br (US\$1.85) a shift whereas others were paid 110 Br (US\$12.72).

One of the strikers told the *Addis Fortune*, "We take all the risk and responsibility like any consultant in night duty. Why are we being paid less while life is unaffordable in Addis?"

Ethiopia is amongst the worst countries in the world for the number of doctors, with one doctor for every 33,000 people, according to figures from the World Health Organisation (WHO).

### **Nigerian lecturers strike over neglect of universities**

Nigerian university lecturers are out on indefinite strike in protest at the deterioration in the universities in terms of numbers employed and the facilities provided.

National President of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Dr. Abdulahi Sule-Kano, told the *Daily Champion* that 16,000 people were currently trying to do the work of 47,000. He said that the universities were struggling to provide their students even with clean water, let alone other basic necessities.

The Nigerian government tried to force an end to the strike by demanding that lecturers register by May 8 or risk losing their jobs. However, the strike continued after the deadline expired.

Other academics in the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) and the College of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU) are also on strike.

### **Community workers in Namibia strike**

Community workers on a project in Keetmanshoop, Namibia, have gone on strike to oppose the way the project is being run. The project is named "People In Need" (PIN) and was set up using money from the Czech Republic to provide social services and jobs for the poor in the area, especially those suffering as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The 45 strikers, who are mainly women, are demanding the replacement of the project leader whom they accuse of ignoring their concerns and acting like a dictator. They are also angry about receiving so little for the handicraft items that they produce that are sold in the Czech Republic.

According to an article in the *Namibian*, the workers handed in a petition to the local governor and the mayor, which read in part, "If something is wrong then we cannot speak our mind .. We are denied our constitutional right to say no to certain things we do not agree on ... The quality of our products is good and they sell like hotcakes at good prices, but we the producers are getting peanuts."



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